

***Better health care at a lower cost:  
“Together for Quality” to transform  
Medicaid and other state health care systems***

By Carol Steckel and Robin Rawls

Every day in Alabama, thousands of patients exchange information with their doctors or other health care providers. Doctors depend on this information, along with information from other sources to make diagnoses, plan treatments or prevent disease. With good information, patients' health care needs can be managed effectively.

Unfortunately, this is not always possible. Reports from specialists or testing facilities may be lost or delayed. Patients may forget what medicines have been prescribed by other doctors. And in an emergency, patients may go to the hospital or to an urgent care center and report incomplete or incorrect healthcare information or even be unable to report any information in the stress of the moment. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when hundreds of evacuees arrived in Alabama and elsewhere without medicine, records or in-depth knowledge about their medical conditions.

Despite the advanced clinical expertise and facilities available in Alabama, physicians do not always have access to the reports, results or medical histories at the time they must make decisions about their patients. Meanwhile, payers such as Medicaid struggle to analyze fragmented, claims-based data as they seek to achieve better health outcomes for their beneficiaries.

The Alabama Medicaid Agency and a diverse group of public and private partners intend to change that. Boosted by a new \$7.6 million federal grant announced recently by Governor Bob Riley, the Alabama Medicaid Agency is now leading a broad-based effort to transform the state's fragmented claims and process-oriented system into one that is coordinated, patient-centered and cost-efficient.

Alabama's proposal, *“Together for Quality,”* was one of 130 proposals from more than 40 states receiving federal funds appropriated in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 to encourage states to transform state Medicaid operations. The two-year grant will be used to create a statewide electronic health information system that links Medicaid, state health agencies, providers and private payers while establishing a comprehensive, quality improvement model for the Alabama Medicaid program.

The statewide electronic system will provide Medicaid, other health and human service agencies, health care providers and private payers with secure, real time access to individual health information, claims, immunization records, prescription data and lab results. This capability, in turn, will support meaningful quality improvement efforts, allowing Medicaid and its health care providers to increase efficiency, decrease costs and make measurable improvements in the quality of care offered.

The project will be coordinated by the Alabama Medicaid Agency in cooperation with an advisory stakeholder council which includes participation by health care providers, health care professional associations, other state agencies, the Task Force to Strengthen Alabama Families, private health plans, health care purchasers, health information technology entities, business, academia, patient groups, and quality improvement organizations.

Alabama Medicaid is already an efficiently-run program, spending only 2 percent of its budget on administration, including claims processing. While we will continue to administer the Medicaid program with a high level of efficiency and accountability, we must begin to address chronic illnesses – both the remediation of complications and the prevention of diseases. “*Together for Quality*” will enable us, with a broad array of partners throughout the state, to truly transform our operations from a process oriented, paper driven system to one that focuses on patient centered, coordinated health care information and services. Put another way, our vision is to build an integrated health care system that focuses on better health outcomes and improves the quality of life for every Medicaid recipient.

To achieve its goals and to truly transform the way health information is shared and patients receive care in this state, this initiative must cut across the lines that have traditionally kept government agencies, health care organizations and other entities from working together. It will not be easy, but it will be worth the effort.

We envision a time when Alabama’s physicians are in a position to fully and completely care for their patients because the test results were provided in a coordinated, well-informed way. This goes far beyond knowing that a medical test was conducted and paid for correctly. To do this, we must (1) increase health care providers’ access to useful, coordinated medical data, (2) improve care coordination, (3) prevent complications that arise from fragmented health information, and (4) reduce service duplication. Thus the adage – better health care at a lower cost can become a reality.

*Carol Steckel is commissioner of the Alabama Medicaid Agency. Robin Rawls is associate director, public affairs and media relations for the agency. For more information on the grant, click on:*

[http://www.medicaid.alabama.gov/news/medicaid\\_transformation.aspx](http://www.medicaid.alabama.gov/news/medicaid_transformation.aspx)